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FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1011

INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE

RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 1045

C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 000090

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/5/2028

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SUBJECT: SPECIAL ENVOY SADA CUMBER ASKS VATICAN TO BROADEN
INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

REF: A. USUN 1126

[¶](#)B. VATICAN 77

[¶](#)C. VATICAN 87

[¶](#)D. VATICAN 67

CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Pol Chief.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: During a November 19 visit to Rome, US Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Sada Cumber urged the Holy See to broaden Catholic-Muslim dialogue to include all schools of Islam, in order to reduce Saudi Arabia's and Iran's ability to claim they speak for all Sunnis and Shias.

Tauran professed satisfaction with the recent UNGA meeting in New York (ref. A), but disagreed with the European Union's position that religious freedom includes a right to "derision". Special Envoy Cumber also met other Vatican officials engaged in inter-religious dialogue, and greeted the Pope. Holy See officials shared Special Envoy Cumber's concerns on the spread of extremism and welcome USG engagement with the OIC. Tauran may be traveling to the US in May of 2009. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) At a meeting with Cardinal Tauran, President of the Holy See's Pontifical Council on Inter-Religious Dialogue, Special Envoy Cumber raised concerns about allowing countries with the most conservative understanding of Sunnism and Shi'ism to claim to speak for all Muslims. Special Envoy Cumber encouraged Tauran to convene a meeting with representatives of all schools of Islam, rather than just the Saudis (ref. B) or the "138 group" (ref. C), to engage them on religious freedom. Tauran said the Holy See also maintains a theological dialogue with scholars and institutions in Iran, Libya, and Egypt, among others. There is a risk, Tauran said, of too many dialogues. He was nevertheless interested in Special Envoy Cumber's ideas, and asked him to send him a written aide memoir so he could discuss them with his staff.

[¶](#)3. (C) Cardinal Tauran expressed satisfaction with the November 12-13 UNGA meeting on inter-faith dialogue (ref. A). He said he was disappointed, however, with President Sarkozy's Envoy's comments on behalf of the European Union. Alain Juppe said "freedom of religion cannot be achieved without freedom of speech, even if it is sometimes used to express derision". Tauran has written to the French to express his disagreement with the view that religious freedom includes freedom for derision.

[¶](#)4. (SBU) Cardinal Tauran may be traveling to the US in May of 2009. Special Envoy Cumber said the State Department would be pleased to arrange meetings for him, an offer Cardinal Tauran welcomed. Embassy Vatican will follow up once his trip is confirmed.

[¶](#)5. (C) Special Envoy Cumber also met with Monsignors Akasheh, a Jordanian Christian specializing in Islam at Tauran's office, and Ortega, the Vatican's MFA point person for the Arabian Peninsula. Both men noted that Saudi authorities' allowing Christians to worship in private is insufficient to practice

Catholicism: bibles, vestments, crucifixes, wine for consecration, and priests to impart the sacraments are also required, but still not allowed. Monsignor Akasheh said the actions of terrorists who wrongly call themselves Muslims were the main reason for the negative international image of Islam. Close behind was Saudi Arabia's repression of religious minorities, especially for Catholics.

¶6. (SBU) In a separate meeting, Miguel Ayuso, President of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, underlined the importance of education as the key to promote positive inter-faith understanding. The West should do everything possible to improve basic and higher education in countries with Muslim majorities. This would do far more for positive change within Islam than any high-level meeting.

Comment

¶7. (C) Holy See officials were very pleased with Special Envoy Cumber's visit and appreciate USG engagement with the OIC. The Vatican gave Special Envoy Cumber VIP seating at the Papal general audience. The Pope himself greeted him and expressed interest in his work. Holy See officials consider American Muslims a special category within Islam, and generally see them as allies in the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance. While the Holy See disagrees with the OIC position on some issues such as defamation of religion (ref. D), it supports dialogue --including USG-OIC dialogue-- as a matter of principle. End comment.

GLENDON